

Article

"A figment of someone else's imagination"?

English Canada, Canadian Literature and the US Border

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I could try to frame the clear distinctions between the US and Canada – political atmospheres, historical divergences, literary lineages – but I would be forced, almost every time, to ask: is that a real divergence or a minor deviation from a larger North American, or Western, norm? So... I find myself reaching not for concrete differences between the countries, but for a sense of the interplay between them, or of the subtle movements between familiarity and difference. And where better to find that but in literature, in language use – or better, in words? (Nolan 2014)

As much as the Canadian nationalist position would contend that the border operates to defend us from the logical conclusion of neocolonialism, the border is more productively viewed as the primary site of examining Canada's overlapping relationships to colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism. (Roberts 2015)

For obvious reasons, perhaps, borders are once again figuring in what was once celebrated as a new borderless world. The Canada-US border is a case in point. The longest land border in the world to be shared by two countries, it is nearly 9000 kilometers on its southern frontier, with an additional 2500 km shared with the state of Alaska in the northwest.¹ The majority of Canadians, upwards of 80% of Canada's 34 million people, live within 200 km of the southern border, and for generations, Canadians have spoken with pride of this, "the longest undefended border in the world," intimating its symbolism of friendship, cooperation, and the free flow of people and goods. In the post 9/11 world, however, the question of border has assumed greater importance. Not only have new stricter regulations for immigration, refugees, and security been implemented, with common US-Canadian security agreements and practices set in place, but the border question has also raised the stakes with regard to Canadian nationalism, Canada's policy of multiculturalism, and the prospect of deeper integration of the two countries, prompting one commentator to lament that Canada now exists in a state of "virtual sovereignty" (Wright 2004). At the same time, scholars interested in matters of literature and culture have set about proposing new frameworks for

understanding cultures in the ever-expanding contexts of interaction ushered in by globalization. Alongside the nationalist position that would uphold a Canadian literary tradition worthy of study, if not also defence, new approaches have, since the late 1980s, argued variously for understanding Canada as a post-national entity, for situating Canadian culture within an expanded American Studies framework, and for taking a view of Canada within the context of the entire New World hemispheric order, not to mention a global, transnational point of view.²

The border figures prominently in these debates: in the first instance, as a contest between nationalism and neo-colonialism, a perennial theme in Canadian political thought and social commentary and reflected in much anglophone Canadian literary and cultural studies.³ As Jody Berland has noted, "Canadians live and write as though the border is everywhere, shadowing everything we contemplate and fear; Americans as though there is no border at all" (Berland 474). Indeed, from almost the beginning of Canada's existence as an independent nation, Canadians have debated the meaning and importance of the Canada-US border. As political scientist James Laxer points out, there are some who have seen it is merely an artificial boundary trumped by geography and *realpolitik*; while for others it defines crucial differences of politics and culture. In the former camp, for those who go by the name continentalists, beginning most notably with Goldwin Smith (1823-1910), Canada consists of "a series of northern extensions of continental regions loosely tethered together through Confederation"; its "regions...[having] more in common with neighboring U.S. regions than...with each other" (Laxer 22-3). For the latter school of thought, dominated by 19th century English-speaking historians, Canada is a "country that emerged in defiance of geography" (Laxer 22). Canada, they recognized, exists as a collection of colonies whose natural geographical links run from north to south. However, Canada exists in defiance of this geographical reality as well as the political and economic pull of its southern neighbour. "[T]he moral of the story" is that Canada was forged in loyalty to the British crown: "The great event in Canadian history, then, had been the northern migration of the United Empire Loyalists at the end of the American Revolution...[who] left their comfortable homes in the south to make new ones in the northern wilderness" (Laxer 22).

This essay follows the scholars cited in the epigraphs in eschewing the identification of concrete differences on the opposite sides of the border in favour of an account of the cultural "commerce" between the two nations. It also takes the question of the border as an opportunity to examine the entwined forces of nationalism and neo-colonialism, the vexed history of colonialism and the uncertain future of Canada within a postcolonial, globalized world order. This essay itself does not dismiss the nationalist investment in the founding of an east-west union nor ignore the almost perennial nationalist warnings of neo-colonialism. On the other hand, it does not rush to celebrate notions of cosmopolitanism or interna-

tionalism that might be used to valorize Canada's post-national identity or for that matter any of the regional, "ethnic" or national literatures of Canada (by the latter I mean writing by representatives of what Will Kymlicka calls the national minorities of First Nations and French Canada). I shall argue that new frameworks for understanding Canadian culture are merited simply because both Canada and the world have changed. More precisely, the essay invokes the often forgotten truism that the making of a national culture occurs within the domestic and international contexts that inform it in any given instant, coupled with the recognition that art is always crossing borders. In order to reflect on these questions, the essay focuses on two moments in anglophone Canada's literary history: first, a moment of rather intense irony and contradiction yet also considerable cross-border cultural commerce between the newly unified (that is, confederated) Canada and the US, namely, the exodus of Canada's brightest literary talent to the US in the late nineteenth century, to New York, where as recent scholarship has it, "the communities of authors necessary to fulfill the literary promise of [Canadian] Confederation" (Mount 160) were established. Second, the essay follows some of the strands in the debates around cultural policy and cultural value from the late 1980s onward, which were occasioned by Canada's the signing of a 1988 Free Trade agreement with the US, by Canada's re-affirmed commitment to multiculturalism (1988), by the extension of the free trade agreement under NAFTA (1994), by the second referendum on Quebec independence (1995), and by the events following the terrorist attacks of 2001. The essay concludes in a third section, a kind of postscript that provides an account of the idea of the border among Canada's indigenous peoples and a reading of a story that might be said to represent the aboriginal position on the border, that is, as a non-border, as "a figment of someone else's imagination."

i

It is worth pointing out that Canadian Confederation, the union of four British North American colonies in 1867, was an act of the Colonial Office in London taken partly in response to the threat of American invasion in the immediate post-Civil War period. Having given support to the Southern forces during the war, Britain worried about the supremacy of the Union army on the continent and urged, nay forced, political union on its northern colonies. Aside from raids by members of the Irish Fenian Brotherhood and the assassination of Member of Parliament Thomas D'Arcy McGee, that threat did not materialize and Canada set about the task of nation building, embarking on a National Policy of railway development, tariff protection and immigration. The objective was to string together the former colonial territories into an east-west federation, in short to build a nation from coast to coast. Ironically, this economic endeavour coincided with one of the largest north-south mi-

grations of Canadians in the country's history. A movement of people that had an important impact on the development of a national literature in Canada. Although a literary nationalism had taken root in Canada with the arrival of a school of native-born writers known as the Confederation poets, as literary historian Nick Mount observes, "it took moving to New York to produce the communities of authors necessary to fulfill the literary promise of Confederation" (160).

Figures vary about the exact size of this migration, as low as 750, 000 between 1880 and 1900, as high as 1 million in the decade of the 1880s alone (Mount 20). But by 1900, the Canadian born population residing in the US stood at about 1.2 million, nearly a quarter of Canada's population at the time (Mount 21). This made Boston with 84, 000 Canadian-born the third largest "Canadian" city (Mount 21). The exodus included much of the nation's literary talent, attracted by a literary market that saw an 88% rise in periodicals between 1880 and 1900, with 21, 000 newspapers and magazines with a circulation of over 100 million copies per issue. A Canadian literary nationalism began with the publication of Charles G. D. Roberts' *Orion and Other Poems* in 1880. A decade or more later, Roberts and most of the writers who formed the nationalist Confederation poets were living in the US, in New York. The Canadians fit into the genteel, edifying and improving culture of the turn of the century America the market-driven literary culture despised by the likes of Ezra Pound. According to Mount, however, the Canadians were not merely following the literary market; in many cases they led it. Indeed, the Canadians in general played a quite specific role within the evolving American culture of the period, taking "leading roles in antimodern literary cultures, including that face of its therapeutic movement that came to be known as New Thought" (Mount 14). This role was linked to a perception of Canada and Canadians held by American editors:

Right up to the First World War, Americans cherished a romantic notion that Canada's unspoiled topography and more vigorous climate produced hardier, more dependable, more moral employees than those reared under southern skies... In the literary world, Canadians regularly found editorial positions on periodicals with an explicit focus on moral or physical well-being (Mount 36).

There was, as Mount's figures show, much work to be had in America's thriving literary market. But the Canadians found themselves favoured literary producers and possessing a favoured commodity: "the myth of the virile Canadian together with the predilection of American editors of the day for poems, stories, and articles with a robust morality in an outdoors setting created a disproportionately high acceptance rate for Canadian contributions to American periodicals" (Mount 37).

New Brunswick-born Bliss Carman assumed numerous editorial roles in New York over an American career that spanned three decades. Known for his collaborations with

American poet Richard Hovey, Carman suffered vilification at the hands of a young Ezra Pound with characteristic bile noted that he was "about the only one of the lot that wouldn't improve with drowning" (qtd in Mount 3). That vilification serves to underscore not only his secure place in the literary market that Pound so despised but also his absence from the emerging modernist literary culture – except perhaps as part of what Tim Armstrong (2005) has termed reform modernism. Indeed, Carman also maintained a lifelong association with the American Mary Perry King and her school of Personal Harmonizing, a movement with ties to the prevalent New Thought, and his collection of King-inspired essays *The Making of Personality* (1908) remains one of his most popular books. What is perhaps important to note here is that this American anti-modernism that Canadians participated in was a response to a continent-wide phenomenon of urbanization. The work of both Canadian and American writers of the period resonated with a continental readership precisely because they shared a common critical discourse on the city (Mount 145).

Carman's cousin, the New Brunswick-born Charles G.D. Roberts, presents a more ambivalent position and reflects the complex predicament of the Canadian writer at the turn of the century. While Roberts' importance in the development of a English-Canadian literature is not in dispute, the legacy of this so-called "Father of Canadian literature" sheds light on the nature of literary culture when viewed in a North American perspective. Born in the rural community of Douglas, New Brunswick in 1860, both Roberts and Carman came under the tutelage of imperial federationist George R. Parkin at Collegiate School in Fredericton. Thereafter, Roberts was educated at the University of New Brunswick, and worked as a school teacher before turning to journalism, serving a short stint as editor of Goldwin Smith's *The Week* in Toronto between 1883 and 1884. In 1885, Roberts accepted a professorship at King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia, and taught until 1895 before his departure to New York in 1897, where he spent another 10 years as editor while devoting himself to the writing of fiction. After a brief return to Fredericton in 1906, Roberts departed for Europe, living in the cities of England, France, Germany for the next 18 years before settling in England in 1912. In 1925, Roberts returned to Canada for a reading tour of the country and a virtual literary coronation, receiving the Lorne Pierce medal for achievement in Canadian letters and assuming the title of national president of the Canadian Authors Association while honoured with a knighthood in 1935 (Hodd).

The publication of Roberts' first book of verse, *Orion and Other Poems* (by American publisher J.B. Lippincott and Co. of Philadelphia) in 1880, is routinely cited as a seminal moment in Canadian literary history, not least for the excitement the book generated among poets of Roberts' own generation, among them the young Ontario-born poet Archibald Lampman, who would later join the patriotic poets of the Confederation school (Roberts, Carman, Wilfred Campbell and D.C. Scott). While writer and critic Steven Scobie has

called the poems "derivative and tedious" (Scobie), D.M.R. Bentley, in his call for renewed critical assessment of the book, laments that the volume is more cited than read (Bentley). Attentive critics may yet agree with Scobie while the student of Canadian literature may be forgiven for a sense of disappointment that this literary monument would largely fail a Canadian content test, focusing as it does on classical themes reflective of Roberts' love of Greek literature. The terms of Lampman's praise are revealing enough: Roberts is lauded for the mere fact of being a Canadian capable of writing "such work" with Lampman marveling at his evocation of "some new paradise of art, calling us to be up and doing" (qtd. in Scobie). In short, Lampman's praise reminds us that there is an argument to be made that literary culture itself is and always is cross-cultural, if not transnational, in important respects.

Roberts' subsequent collection *In Divers Tones* (1886) includes patriotic poems as well as poems with Canadian subject matter. However, criticism remains undecided about what (or if any) substantial political position can explain the terms of Roberts' expressed patriotism. Influential Canadian nationalist Joseph Edmund Collins is credited with promoting Roberts' work in the service of Canadian republicanism (Taylor), but as Tracey Ware's discussion of *In Divers Tones* suggests, Roberts' nationalism sits somewhat awkwardly with his formative classicism and his emerging pastoralism amidst the handful of hints at his growing attraction to the American market, if not also desire for a career within it (Ware). Roberts, Ware tells us, abandoned Collins' republicanism after realizing the threat of annexation to the US that Canada could face. Instead, Roberts joined the growing list of Anglo-Canadians who favoured closer ties with the UK in the movement of imperial federation. Lampman, for his part, remarked that Canada was too young to comprehend such expressions of patriotic feeling (Ware).

Roberts' work in prose fiction went some way towards sustaining his career financially, and to this day attracts critical attention. Indeed, Roberts can rightfully claim a place in Anglo-American literature, perhaps world literature, for his invention of the realistic animal story, a genre in which the lives of animals are chronicled in a more or less omniscient narration that draws on scientific understanding and direct observation of animal behaviour. While a literary debate about the realism of these animal stories erupted in the early years of the century (precipitated by no less than American president and "strenuous life" advocate Theodore Roosevelt) attests to the genre's popularity, the animal story, with its setting of unspecified wilderness is an inherently "continental genre," argues Mount. Yet to Mount's point one can add that, as Roberts emphasized in his own account of the evolution of the animal story, the genre serves a therapeutic function: "The animal story, as now have it, is a potent emancipator. It frees for a little from the world of shop-worn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self of which we do well to grow weary. It helps us return to na-

ture, without requiring that we at the same time return to the barbarism" (Roberts, *Kindred*, 19). Hence, like Carman, Roberts serviced the continent's growing urban lifestyle with the anti-modern antidote of a purifying nature, adding popular genres such as the realistic animal story.

If Roberts proved himself an innovator of popular literary genres, he also showed his ability to master and refine others, one in particular that facilitated cross-border commerce in the form of the tourist traffic: the tourist guide. Modern mass tourism in North America may be said to have begun with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, which facilitated travel to the continent's premier tourist destination, Niagara Falls, while other improvements in road and rail transport as well as steamship service boosted the fledgling industry. The extension of the Canadian Pacific Railroad west to the newly minted province of British Columbia saw the CPR granted concessions to develop a series of luxury hotels and tourist sites along the route. On the east coast, Roberts played an important role in similar developments, lending his considerable literary talents to the promotional aims of the Canadian Pacific's Dominion Atlantic Railway. According to D. M. R. Bentley, Roberts had a "sophisticated understanding of the guide-book genre and its literary, political, and commercial possibilities in the 1890s" (Bentley, "Tour Guides"). His most significant promotional pieces, *The Canadian Guide-Book: The Tourist's and Sportsman's Guide to Eastern Canada and Newfoundland* (first published in 1891 with 2nd edition in 1892) and *The Land of Evangeline and the Gateways Thither* (1895), as Bentley tell us, displayed his talent for combining "poetry, patriotism, and tourism... with features designed to appeal specifically to American and, to a much lesser extent, British tourists" (Bentley, "Tour Guides"). Roberts' *The Land of Evangeline and the Gateways Thither* (1895) is the most intriguing of works in the genre as it deals in a well defined landscape in the continental literary imagination.

Before Anne of Green Gables became the reigning icon of eastern Canada's Maritime literary culture, Longfellow's *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847) popularized the 1755 deportation of the French-speaking settlers of Nova Scotia, the Acadians. Not only did the poem give birth to an entire American mythology around the virtuous heroine of the poem; it also fostered a strong sense of community among Acadians of the region at the very moment in the late nineteenth century when they set about defining themselves as a people with a mission of self-preservation and equal citizenship. At the same time, the story was enlisted in attracting tourists to the region, an industry burgeoning on both sides of the border. In this process of "touristification," as Patricia Jasen argues, "Not only places but people became the objects of the commodification process when they fell under the tourists' gaze, and the act of defining them, of endowing them with meaning, itself involved a kind of appropriation or assertion of control." Citing Edward Said's observation on the role of European... to define the colonization process as well as exotic landscapes and peoples, Jasen argues that "in

North America the growing tourist industry was one aspect of the association between imperialism and culture which historians have largely overlooked" (Jasen 16).

Roberts displays his skill in handling the literary theme in the opening pages of *The Land of Evangeline*, acknowledging this pervasive imaginative literary "colonization" of the landscape: "The tourist, moreover, escaping to this cool atmosphere from the tropic fervor of Washington Street or Broadway, has smothered the land with indiscriminate ecstasies; while persuasive handbooks have praised it in language that might make the Garden of Eden feel diffident" (Roberts, *Evangeline*, 1). Reworking a romantic Wordsworthian conceit, Roberts deftly turns the aura of literary imagination to factual truth: "The land endures the test of close acquaintance. The charm of illusion is gently displaced by an equally seductive charm of fact" (1). At the same time as the book carves out a niche with a realism and pragmatism that renounces neither the romantic nor the exotic, Roberts follows Carman's therapeutic message for continental urbanites by praising the virtues of the Nova Scotia climate: "In truth it is a good air, tonic and temperate, guiltless of malaria, ignorant of hay-fever, friendly to work, to play, to sleep, to appetite. It touches to content the o'er-wrought nerves, and fills with healing breath the troubled lungs" (Roberts, 1895, 2).

The ironic post-script to the achievement of Canadian literary expatriates such as Roberts, Carman and others is that when a nationalist literary culture began to establish itself in the 1920s and 30s, they were often forgotten, their works selectively canonized, and or their American work faulted by chauvinistic Canadian critics who saw aesthetic and imaginative weakness: Canadians, it was assumed, couldn't possibly do their best work in the US. Likewise, their success within popular genres and their contributions to both Canadian and American literary culture have been overlooked. Indeed, a good number of Canadian critics would agree with Desmond Pacey's assessment of Roberts' American sojourn as "lost years" (Mount 153). Nonetheless, the legacy of the expatriates is confirms that the Canadian literary commodity most valued by any market its geographical and natural immensity, its offer of manly adventure within a primordial wilderness, and its therapeutic release for the tired urban masses.

ii

By the 1960s, a full-fledged literary nationalism was in bloom in Canada. However, by the late 70s there were signs of state ideological shifts on both sides of the border which would play an important role in literary and cultural matters. In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, Canada witnessed divisive debates as the issue of opening the border to free trade raised concerns about the continued existence of a Canadian culture industry in a continental market. There were also rising neo-liberal and neo-conservative views about globaliza-

tion, the decline of the welfare state, indeed the end of the nation-state altogether. On the scholarly front, the period has been witness to calls for an expanded American Studies, a new North American Studies and a Hemispheric Studies, to name the most prominent.

In this context, Canadian writers and critics began to assess these changes on Canada's literary production. Significant here is Frank Davey's 1993 study *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*, a semiotic reading of 16 English Canadian novels published from 1967, Canada's centennial year and the height of its cultural nationalism, to 1988. The point of closure is important. For Davey chooses to open the book with an essay on the public response of members of the Canadian arts community to the 1988 Free Trade Deal with the United States, and their interventions in the election that would seal its fate. The book proposes to study Canada as a field of discourses, to extend beyond evaluative, impressionistic, or thematic criticism, and locate Canadian literary texts within the larger "socio-political text" of 'Canada.' In his concluding remarks, Davey notes the following:

In many of the novels neither the text nor its protagonists inhabit any social geography that can be called 'Canada.' They inhabit a post-national space, in which sites are as interchangeable as postcards, in which discourses are transnational, and in which political issues are constructed on non-national (and often ahistorical) ideological grounds. (Davey 259)

Davey goes on to note a "lack of nationalist discourses and signs, unless ironically deployed". "What they offer instead", Davey tells us, "repeatedly and paradoxically, are various discourses of intimacy, home, and neighbourhood, together with others of global distance and multinational community. Between the local and the global, where one might expect to find constructions of region, province, and nation, one finds instead voyages, air flights, and international hotels" (258-9).

A decade later, anxieties about Canada's national literature remained. Stephen Henighan's controversial and overtly polemical *When Words Deny the World* (2002) further intensified the debate opened by critics such as Frank Davey in *Post-National Arguments*. Henighan declared that the decade of the 1990s would be lost to future generations because Canadian writers refused to record the nation in its linguistic, cultural and historical specificity: "No sooner has the Free Trade Agreement gone through than Canadian novelists lost the thread of contemporary Canadian experience" (180). Henighan compared the situation to that of the beginning of the century, as explored by Nick Mount:

The advent of Free Trade, NAFTA and globalization sanding down the rough-edged difference between the two countries' surface realities, has to some extent immersed all Canadian writers in the dilemma of the Canadian writer living in the United States. Our Americanization has made our own reality more remote to us, more dif-

ficult to evoke. (Henighan 208)

Henighan charges that the decade of the 1990s, the period immediately following the passage of the Canada-US Free Trade Deal, and the decade of the ratification of NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Deal), is one in which the celebrated works of Canadian fiction pay little attention to Canadian specificity. Particularly egregious in this regard were high profile and widely celebrated novels, including *The Stones Diaries* by Carol Shields, the only novel ever to win top literary prizes in the two countries: the Governor General's Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Shields' fiction, he argues, represents a world "assimilated into the free trader's homogenized 'North America,'" with *The Stone Diaries* condemned as "the flagship novel of Free Trade" (184).

Shields is unique in reaching an untroubled, ahistorical North Americans in Canadians placidly assimilated into continental (i.e. U.S.) norms. It can hardly be a coincidence that this book was one of the most popular works of fiction in both Canada and the U.S., particularly among wealthy professional, during the months in which the NAFTA was implemented. The novel's allegiance to the abstraction of the continentalist ideal helps to illuminate its hasty, imprecise narrative tone, emotional evasions, glib generalizations and inability to do its characters justice within specific, carefully rendered cultural contexts. (Henighan 184)

Whereas in Henighan's view novelists writing between the 1940s and the 1980s could be said to have staked a claim on their native land, that Canada possessed a novelistic tradition that recorded the nation, the 1990s, ushering in the era of globalization and a new borderless world, left Canadian novelists without a focus:

The crucial obstacle to the extension of a significant novelistic tradition in Canada today lies in our inability to pull our own society into focus. In the absence of a firm engagement with our history, language, realities and myths, we cannot set sail on the tides of the globalized planet. One must first be independent before being able to probe the pleasures of interdependence. (Henighan 207)

Henighan sees in the late twentieth century a preoccupation that can be seen in authors of the previous century, and in particular authors like Roberts with their emphasis on the primeval and hence a borderless and expansive wilderness. In the case of the writers targeted as representatives of "free trade fiction," Henighan points out that continental similarities of geography and geology employed to fashion the thematic webs of meaning in their work. For Carol Shields in *The Stone Diaries*, he contends, a focus on "geological similarities [suppresses] historical and cultural differences."

The approaches of Davey and Henighan differ in significant ways, but both it can be said rely on a more or less reflective notion of the function of literature. This realist project has been an important element of the Canadian imaginary and finds its modern articulation

in the writings of Northrop Frye on Canadian literature:

[T]he cultivated Canadian has the same kind of interest in Canadian poetry that he has in Canadian history or politics. Whatever its merits, it is the poetry of his own country, and it gives him an understanding of that country which nothing else can give him. The critic of Canadian literature has to settle uneasily somewhere between the Canadian historian or social scientist, who has no comparative value-judgements to worry about and the ordinary literary critic, who has nothing else. (Frye 163)

Anxieties displayed by Davey and Henighan should be located in relation to this nationalist imperative toward a realist reflection of cultural specificity. A desire to push beyond the framework of the nation is clear in one of the most recent interventions in the question of the border, sovereignty, and the US, Kit Dobson's *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization* (2009). Dobson, like Davey, begins his reading of Canadian literature and globalization in the year 1967 and examines some key texts that articulated the stance of cultural nationalism through the late 1970s. Dobson's book is also in part a reply to Henighan as well as being a continuation of the debate opened by Davey. As Dobson sees it, Davey's book relies on the nation as a bulwark against capitalist globalization. Dobson's aim is to see "what happens when the transnational is taken to be the ground from which we begin discussions about literary production within a geopolitical space like Canada"; in particular, "recognizing and coping with the global world system into which people are increasingly interpolated as citizens, refugees, undocumented immigrants, or otherwise" (xvii). For Dobson, "Writing in Canada [today] is concerned with crossing national borders thematically, just as it is concerned with marketing on a global scale. This transnational mindset can be seen in the writing, in Canada's cultural industries and cultural institutions, and in our methods of reading" (xvii).

As Dobson points out Canadian writers today are imagining a world beyond the nation, and that experience of the transnational is surely worth attending to. But the idea of a Canadian literature in English or any literature for that matter imagined without the idea of the nation, on the terrain of the global is not without its problems. I cannot offer any easy answers and my best response to this condition would echo not only critics such as Homi Bhabha, who see a fundamental ambivalence in the idea and practice of the nation, but also Canadians of my own generation, such as Robert Wright in his *Virtual Sovereignty*:

Globalization and neo-conservatism have downsized and dismantled the Canada of my youth, a Canada of social democratic consensus, of generous state support for public education, cultural production and the social safety net, a Canada that pursued an independent foreign policy, a Canada that cared deeply about young people and understood them to be central to the project of nation building. (Wright 17)

As cultural critic Jody Berland sees it, the values of "kindness, altruism and compassion,

fairness, civility, respect for difference" are "no longer represented as a legitimate basis for public morality. Instead, governments, cities, old-age homes, film productions, galleries, and schools must all be run like businesses and business people must run them. We are witnessing no less a fundamental redefinition of the concept of democracy in the public sphere. (Berland, qtd. in Wright 18)

The border makes a difference. It sets the geographical boundaries within which a particular people are said to exist; it demarcates regimes of law within which, for better or worse, social intercourse and nation building take place. And historically the very existence of national borders has meant refuge from persecution: for African Americans fleeing slavery in the 19th century, for aboriginals on both sides of the border seeking refuge from war and starvation. These are hardly instances without problem, but the fact remains that the border can stand for the hope of a new life. Stephen Henighan takes a much more definite stand in an essay called "In Praise of Borders," where he points out that we haven't learned how to be international, that international citizens do not yet exist. "The current cant about the borderless world overlooks the obvious: there can be no internationalism without nationalism, no interdependence without independence" (240).

iii

I want to end by turning to another perspective on the issue of the border, taking up the quotation in my title, which comes from Thomas King, American-born, aboriginal writer, critic, and educator, currently a professor of English at the University of Guelph in Waterloo, Ontario. It is to King that this essay owes the quoted words that form part of my title. "A figment of someone else's imagination" comes from his *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (2002), first delivered to a Canadian audience in the forum of the prestigious Massey Lecture series for 2003 and via the medium of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's nationally broadcast Ideas program. In it King explores the importance of stories in our lives as well as their specific meanings and roles in aboriginal tradition. Surveying native writing on the whole continent, King brings forth a few examples of contemporary writers: "Canadians all," he says. "Though the border doesn't mean much to the majority of Native people in either country. It is, after all, a figment of someone else's imagination" (102). On the most immediate level, what King means is that the border has little symbolic force in the lives of the continent's indigenous peoples. Indeed, as political scientist James Laxer observes, "the Canada-US border is relatively recent creation not of their own making. A map of North America depicting the territories of the First Nations prior to the first European settlements would graphically represent the entirely different political space that then existed" (113).

Yet although the question of the border for aboriginal people is surely a matter of colonialism, past and present, King has been an important dissenter not only from the idea of the nation as framework in which to imagine community but also from the idea of a postcolonial criticism that might offer a new and potentially liberating perspective on aboriginal culture and politics:

While post-colonialism purports to be a method by which we can begin to look at those literatures which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer, the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America. At the same time, the term organizes the literature progressively suggesting that there is both progress and improvement. No less distressing, it also assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic. And, worst of all, the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. Ironically, while the term itself post-colonial strives to escape to find new centres, it remains, in the end, a hostage to nationalism. (King, "Godzilla," 242-3)

King warns that a post-colonial view of the North American situation has the potential to reinscribe nationalism, and insists that an aboriginal literature will be something altogether different. "[W]e need to find descriptors which do not invoke the cant of progress and which are not joined at the hip with nationalism. Post-colonial might be an excellent term to use to describe Canadian literature, but it will not do to describe Native literature" (King, "Godzilla," 243).

King prefers to remain on the terrain of imagination and refuses to allow an ultimate purchase for intellectual categories or for that matter material realities of colonialism in the aboriginal world. His frequently anthologized short story "Borders," published in 1993 as part of a collection called *One Good Story, That One*, is an obvious starting point for an aboriginal perspective on the border. In the story, an aboriginal woman from a reserve in Alberta, along with her young son, plans a visit to her daughter living just across the border in Salt Lake City, Utah. But when, at the border-crossing, the woman declares her citizenship to be Blackfoot rather than Canadian, she and her son are turned back only to be turned back again when she repeats the single identification on the Canadian side. The story fits easily into a postcolonial view of the North American border, as Kit Dobson comments:

The story demonstrates the artificiality of the 49th parallel border and shows the imposition of colonial sovereignties upon people who previously spanned both sides of

the border. It shows how Indigenous people are compelled to reconcile themselves to national labels that do not fit with their lives, or else to disappear – to head back home and stay out of the way. (122)

Yet I will argue that while King's story points beyond a postcolonial reading of the border and its relation to indigenous people, it also leaves some issues unanswered, especially in regard to the role of transnational spaces and realities. Whether King intends his title to refer to borders in the generic sense of the term or to the activity of border construction that goes on in the mind as well as on the ground is unclear. But the fact is that story is called "Borders" and not "The Border." And so I will look at the story as a deconstruction of the border as well as the process of category-making while also trying to point out what remains troublingly unanswered in the story. Briefly, the border itself is presented in the story as a rather insubstantial entity, or rather its relation to geographical realities makes it so. Twice in the story the border is marked by the image of truncated flagpoles that signal the approach to and movement away from the international boundary. At the story's conclusion, the young boy, the story's narrator says, "I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, and then they rolled over a hill and disappeared" (145). This image of the flagpoles disappearing into the hills is suggestive of a view of the border and of the symbols of nations (the flags, and the truncated phallic poles) as impermanent. At the same time, the image of the blue water tower is suggestive both of confinement and the technological apparatus of the state that seeks to dominate nature.

Narrated from the point of view of the imperfect understanding of a twelve-year boy, the story does not offer a complete or explicit view of the mother-daughter relationship. But it is clear that the tensions arising between them are played out in geographical and categorizing terms. In other words, the idea of borders is not confined to the political nation-state construction that informs the post-colonial reading of the story. Anyhow, Laetitia's move to Salt Lake City becomes an occasion for a number negative comparisons between "there" and "here" on the part of her mother. The absence of good drinking water across the border is one point of dissatisfaction advocated by the mother while also refuting any arguments about unique attractions on the American side, in Salt Lake City. Similarly, in preparation for the border crossing, the mother makes sure that her son is appropriately dressed in smart clothes so as not to appear "American". Furthermore, the expected differences marked by the boundary do not conform to imagination as the young boys observes that a town on the American side with the name of Sweet Grass sounds more like a name associated with the Canadian side. The Canadian border town called Coutts, on the other hand, which "sounds abrupt and rude," should to the boy's thinking be on the American side (134).

The mother and son do eventually cross the border and pay their visit to Laetitia, but not

until they spend two days going back and forth between the border stations, sleeping in their car in the parking lot of a Duty Free shop. In fact, nothing in the woman's declaration of citizenship changes: in the final act of the story she once again declares herself Blackfoot, but the border guard this time allows her through. No doubt the impetus for granting permission to pass the border is the ensuing negative publicity that the incident stands to generate as representatives of the media arrive on the scene. The man who runs the Duty Free shop declares the woman a heroine who stands up for her beliefs. Yet it can be argued the story puts a naive faith in the media to provide positive representations of aboriginal grievance and its power to compel governments to succumb to media generated pressure. At the same time, the neutral territory between the border stations is represented by the Duty Free shop, where the woman and young boy find refuge, with its suggestion that the power of transnational capital offers a haven for those fleeing the tyranny of nation-states and their borders.

This essay has endeavoured to explore the importance of the Canada-US border in the literary history of English Canada by highlighting the complex cultural interactions between the two nations. In the years immediately following the establishment of the Dominion of Canada, a group of Anglo-Canadian expatriates played a significant role within the evolving North American anti-modern therapeutic culture of the early twentieth century while also enabling the development of a distinctly Canadian English literary community. In addition to the complexities of this kind of cross-border cultural commerce, the border offers an opportunity to examine the entwined forces of nationalism and neo-colonialism, the New World legacy of colonialism and the future of Canada within a postcolonial, globalized world order, of which no better example can be found in the writing of contemporary indigenous people in Canada, those for whom the border appears to be a figment of someone else's imagination. In the aftermath of the 1988 Free Trade agreement with the US, questions of cultural policy and cultural value arose among anglophone Canadian writers and critics. Indeed, the nationalist imperative that found expression again at that juncture remains in Canadian literary and cultural studies, including persistent Anglo-Canadian anxieties about the need for literary works to present a realistic reflection of the cultural specificity of Canada, in the face of the threat of the continentalization of its literary culture, and the attenuation of Canadian national identity.

NOTES

1. With the conclusion of the American War of Independence, the 1783 Treaty of Paris established boundaries from the eastern coast to an area northwest of Lake Superior, with an extension along the 49th parallel west to the Rocky Mountains negotiated in London in 1818. A protracted

- dispute over the boundary between the state of Maine and New Brunswick was settled in 1842 under the terms of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. On the western coast, the Oregon Treaty (1846) defined the boundary to the Pacific Ocean, thereby completing the transcontinental boundary. In 1903, a commission was established to oversee the definition of the Alaska boundary in the northwest. See Laxer, pp. 329-62.
2. See recent works by Roberts (2013, 2015), Siemerling (2005) Siemerling and Casteel (2010) and Dobson (2009)
 3. The classic statement of Canada's neo-colonial relation with the US is George Grant's 1965 *Lament for a Nation*, in which Grant "mourns the end of Canada as a sovereign state" (Grant 4). In the decade following Confederation (1867), the Canada First movement emerged to promote national autonomy within the British Empire; meanwhile, Canada pursued a National Policy (1879) of east-west economic integration. In 1911, the issue of Canada-US free trade (reciprocity) stirred popular sentiment against the US connection in favour of loyalty to Great Britain. The First World War saw the emergence of a sense of national identity among English Canadians accompanied by the establishment of cultural institutions dedicated to Canadian concerns. The 1929 Aird Report on radio broadcasting was the first policy document to highlight the cross-border cultural threats posed by US mass media. The Second World War and the ensuing Cold War period did much to integrate Canada into a North American economic and political order. The 1951 Report of the Massey Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951) expressed concerns about "influences from across the border, as pervasive as they are friendly" and warned about "the very present danger of permanent dependence" of American influence on Canadian cultural life (quoted in Smith). Author of a 1956 report advocating economic nationalism, Walter Gordon was central to the establishment of the Canada Development Corporation in 1965, with a mandate to limit foreign ownership of media. After 1965, the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson grew more dismissive of state initiatives, and English-Canadian nationalism was taken up by popular organizations. See Smith.

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